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Revista de Estudios Sociales

Digital intermediation in paid
domestic work in Latin America

Guest Editors

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Submission of articles
August 1st to 31st, 2023

The *Revista de Estudios Sociales (RES)* of Universidad de los Andes (Colombia) kindly invites the academic community to submit articles for a special issue on the topic of “**Digital intermediation in paid domestic work in Latin America**”.

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The articles should be submitted **between August 1st and August 31st, 2023**

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Overview

This thematic issue reports on the transformations in domestic work in Latin America as a result of the incorporation of new technologies that have led to the emergence of digital intermediaries; a type of intermediation that began to grow in 2014. Depending on the existing legislation in each country and the composition of the sector, the intervention of digital intermediaries occurs through the placement of workers, outsourcing, and the selection and management of personnel. As with other types of work platforms, digital intermediation rose sharply during the covid-19 pandemic, as communication technologies supplanted a large part of interpersonal exchanges. Currently, more than seventy digital intermediaries are involved in the paid domestic work sector in Latin America, making it important to analyze the effects of this intermediation at regional level.

Work in private homes is among the most important occupations in the region as it is one of the main sources of employment for migrant workers and women from low-income sectors. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO), in 2019, the sector accounted for 6.8% of employed persons in the region and 11.3% of salaried women (ILO 2021a). These workers are often exposed to greater violations of their labor rights because they work at their employers' homes. They are also subject to multidimensional discrimination, based on gender, class, ethnicity, and racial inequalities inherent to Latin American societies (López Mourelo 2020; Celeberti 2019; Brites 2013; Gorbán and Tizziani 2018).

Since the adoption of ILO Convention 189 in 2011 and its ratification in 18 of the region's countries, many States modified their legislation in order to guarantee decent conditions for domestic workers. However, full access to rights remains a major challenge due to the high incidence of informality which, in 2019, reached 72.3% of domestic workers in Latin America (ILO 2021a).

Beyond the persistence of informality, the literature has shown that the definition of working conditions depends largely on hiring mechanisms, whereby intermediaries (both public and private) play a key role (Fudge and Hobden 2018). However, in the region, their influence has been scarcely analyzed. Even with limited and fragmented data, estimates show that they are still underdeveloped in Latin America and the Caribbean, compared to other regions. In the United States, 57% of domestic workers are hired through employment agencies or service providers, a proportion that reached 70% in European Union countries in 2019 (ILO 2021b). In Latin America, on the other hand, recruitment and direct hiring by households through personal relationships and proximity networks continue to be mainstream (Cebollada Gay 2021). Indirect recruitment does not exceed 20% in any of the region's countries, although there has been a clear upward trend over the last decade (ILO 2021a). As a result of the massive use of communication technologies —mainly websites and applications—, there has been both a transformation in the modes of intervention of traditional intermediaries (employment agencies or direct providers of cleaning and care services) and the emergence of new models of digital intervention. Depending on the country under study, digital intermediaries may be digital employment agencies or innovative intermediation structures.

Digital home service platforms altered recruitment mechanisms given that they mostly engage in connecting labor supply and demand (Hunt and Machingura 2016). The intimacy involved in working in an employer's home and performing caregiving tasks shape a particular employment relationship based on trust, which is why platforms need to offer trustworthy workers. This digitized trust is produced by exposing the identity of domestic workers and caregivers (Shoenbaum 2016), defined both through criminal background checks and through how they present themselves on different social networks —Facebook, Twitter, etc. — (Ticona and Mateescu 2018). While the identity of the worker may be associated with a certain expertise in the task she is asked to perform (Shoenbaum 2016), her profile on the platform —often associated with her social network profiles— leads to the reproduction of forms of discrimination in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class, among other characteristics (Van Doorn 2017; Hunt and Machingura 2016).

Among the services they offer are the placement of female workers and the direct provision of cleaning and child or adult care services on an outsourced basis (services traditionally provided by employment agencies). At the same time, digital intermediaries may eventually participate in negotiating the employment contract between the worker and the employer household, and effect the settlement of wages and the payment of employer contributions (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Pereyra et al. 2022). The applications they use serve to display the number of hours worked, the corresponding remuneration, and to make the payment method transparent (Hunt and Machingura 2016). They can also provide information on labor regulations and tax payments (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Tizziani and Poblete 2022).

Digital intermediaries that offer cleaning and/or child and elderly care services in homes, while having particularities related to the type of activity they cater to, share some characteristics with other platforms. First, the platforms appear as technological intermediaries that limit themselves to linking those who require a service with those who provide it. In no case does the digital intermediary position itself as an actor in that relationship, given that there is no labor outsourcing (Hunt and Machingura 2016; Renan Barzilay and Ben-David 2017; Fudge and Hobden 2018). Intermediaries establish a sort of “immunity” from liability for the relationship between the employer and the worker through different strategies, including the modification of the terms of service contract, the orchestration of information asymmetries, and the use

of algorithms to manage the available jobs (Van Doorn 2017). Second, these digital intermediaries also structure their intervention around control mechanisms by using reputation systems, which are generally highly opaque to female workers. Scoring is sustained by arbitrary criteria (Ticona and Mateescu 2018) and they promote an “audit culture,” which pushes female workers to accept employers’ demands, even if they exceed the limits agreed upon at the time of recruitment (Van Doorn 2017). These reputation systems are biased in only one direction, from employers to workers, and mute the latter’s power to appraise employers’—often abusive—behavior (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Van Doorn 2017).

The final question raised unanimously by the literature on digital intermediaries specialized in household tasks is whether this form of intermediation can lead to greater levels of formalization. Domestic and care work is generally performed outside any state regulation—although a regulatory framework may exist—and depending on the personal and daily negotiation of each of the elements that make up the employment relationship—schedules, tasks, how they are carried out, remuneration, vacations, leaves of absence, among others—. Some characteristics of digital intermediaries suggest that they help to standardize the activity, clearly establishing an employment relationship and allowing access to legally recognized rights. First, the institutionalization of the recruitment process and the payment of wages through electronic means or bankarization seems to be associated with the formalization of paid domestic work (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Pereyra et al. 2022). Second, the possibility of recording the number of hours worked in the application makes remunerations predictable (Hunt and Machingura 2016). Third, domestic workers’ claims can be supported by information about labor regulations, access to social security, or specific insurance, while at the same time informing employers about their obligations. The platforms can therefore serve to educate by transmitting an ideal of the labor relationship through regular communications or even by generating good practice manuals (Ticona and Mateescu 2018).

Existing literature tends to focus on a specific type of digital platforms that follow the “on-demand” model, similar to that operating in other sectors. This model generally considers workers as “self-employed providers” and specializes in one-off, low-hour, short-term services. There are, however, other models of digital intervention in the sector. A study by Digital Future Society (2021) differentiates, for example, for the Spanish case, “on-demand” platforms from those organized as long-term placement agencies, specialized in care services, which involve the establishment of salaried relationships between employer households and workers, and which allow access to social protections.

Studies that address Latin American experiences also account for this diversity. Compared to other intermediaries (employment agencies or service providers), digital platforms operating in the region seem to focus mainly on the low hourly hiring segment (Cebollada Gay 2021; Madariaga et al. 2019; Pereyra et al. 2022). This common feature does not cancel out the contrast between the scenarios that shape the different business models. For example, in Argentina, it is worth highlighting the particularity of the Zolvers platform which, depending on the type of labor and financial intermediation services it offers and the characteristics of the regulation of the sector, intervenes mostly in the framework of salaried relationships. By promoting the formalization of labor relations and facilitating access to employment, it can help improve the labor trajectories of female workers (Madariaga et al. 2019; Pereyra, Poblete and Tizziani 2020; Pereyra et al. 2022; Tizziani and Poblete 2022). In contrast, Ferreira Vale and Nociolini Rebecchi (2021) highlight the implications of the “uberization” of home services in Brazil, through Donamaid. In this case, the platform limits itself to connecting clients with “self-employed cleaning professionals,” and reserves for itself various mechanisms of control and supervision of work processes. The study highlights the intensification of informalizing trends and of the historical devaluation of paid domestic work implied by the advance of this type of digital platform (Ferreira Vale and Nociolini Rebecchi 2021). These contrasts

suggest the need to analyze the effects of the expansion of digital platforms in household services, considering the different business models they adopt, the characteristics of the labor markets in which they intervene, and the institutional and regulatory contexts in which they develop.

We are particularly interested in proposals that address a national case, focus on a specific platform, or compare cases (types of intermediaries, national cases) and that analyze the following:

- **The business model and its effects on working conditions.** In Latin America, there are different types of digital work platforms. Some favor salaried labor relations while others propose the hiring of women as self-employed workers. This differentiation in hiring methods, along with other characteristics of the business model (payment by electronic means, ease of registration, establishment of control of hours worked, evaluation of female workers, etc.), are directly related to working conditions and, particularly, to the levels of formalization. An analysis of these characteristics will provide a full understanding of the effects of digital intermediation.
- **The use of digital intermediaries resulting from transformations in domestic and care work during the pandemic and post-pandemic.** The covid-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the way in which household tasks are organized, while at the same time producing substantial changes in the domestic and care work sector. The post-pandemic accounts for these changes which —far from being temporary or circumstantial— redefine the ways in which domestic workers are hired in Latin America. An interesting aspect in this new scenario, is the role played by digital intermediaries and how they adapt to these changes, in many cases, intensifying them.
- **How labor regulations are conditioning the development of digital intermediaries.** As in the case of digital labor platforms involved in other sectors of activity, there has been no specific legislation to regulate digital intermediaries involved in the recruitment of domestic workers. As a result, the development of different types of intermediation in the region is conditioned by specific regulations related to pre-existing labor intermediation (employment agencies, placement agencies) and domestic work. It is also determined by the spaces of regulatory uncertainty left by these regulations. The study of national particularities will shed light on how changes in regulations can reduce the negative effects of the intervention of digital intermediaries.
- **Domestic workers' appropriation and use of digital technology.** In recent years, and particularly during the pandemic, several domestic workers' organizations decided to create applications similar to those developed by household service companies. These applications operate as labor exchanges, but at the same time are intended to inform workers of their rights and empower them to ensure that these rights are respected in the workplace. The analysis of this type of experience can provide an account of the way in which communication technology shapes both the mode of hiring and the negotiation for decent working conditions in employer households.

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